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I Wrote Bush's War Words -- in 1965

by Daniel Ellsberg

President Bush's explanation Tuesday night for staying the course in Iraq evoked in me a sense of familiarity, but not nostalgia. I had heard virtually all of his themes before, almost word for word, in speeches delivered by three presidents I worked for: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon. Not with pride, I recognized that I had proposed some of those very words myself.

Drafting a speech on the Vietnam War for Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara in July 1965, I had the same task as Bush's speechwriters in June 2005: how to rationalize and motivate continued public support for a hopelessly stalemated, unnecessary war our president had lied us into.

Looking back on my draft, I find I used the word "terrorist" about our adversaries to the same effect Bush did.

Like Bush's advisors, I felt the need for a global threat to explain the scale of effort we faced. For that role, I felt China was better suited as our "real" adversary than North Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh, just as Bush prefers to focus on Al Qaeda rather than Iraqi nationalists. "They are trying to shake our will in Iraq — just as they [sic] tried to shake our will on Sept. 11, 2001," he said.

My draft was approved by McNamara, national security advisor McGeorge Bundy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, but it was not delivered because it was a clarion call for mobilizing the Reserves to support an open-ended escalation of troops, as Johnson's military commanders had urged.

LBJ preferred instead to lie at a news conference about the number of troops they had requested for immediate deployment (twice the level he announced), and to conceal the total number they believed necessary for success, which was at least 500,000. (I take with a grain of salt Bush's claim that "our commanders tell me they have the number of troops they need to do their job.")

A note particularly reminiscent in Bush's speech was his reference to "a time of testing." "We have more work to do, and there will be tough moments that test America's resolve," he said.

This theme recalled a passage in my 1965 draft that, for reasons that will be evident, I have never chosen to reproduce before. I ended by painting a picture of communist China as "an opponent that views international politics as a whole as a vast guerrilla struggle ... intimidating, ambushing, demoralizing and weakening those who would uphold an alternative world order."

"We are being tested," I wrote. "Have we the guts, the grit, the determination to stick with a frustrating, bloody, difficult course as long as it takes to see it through....? The Asian communists are sure that we have not." Tuesday, Bush said: Our adversaries "believe that free societies are essentially corrupt and decadent, and with a few hard blows they can force us to retreat."

His speechwriters, like me, then faced this question from the other side. To meet the enemy's test of

resolve, how long must the American public support troops as they kill and die in a foreign land? Their answer came in the same workmanlike evasions that served Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon: "as long as we are needed (and not a day longer) ... until the fight is won."

I can scarcely bear to reread my own proposed response in 1965 to that question, which drew on a famous riposte by the late U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson during the Cuban missile crisis:

"There is only one answer for us to give. It was made ... by an American statesman ... in the midst of another crisis that tested our resolution. Till hell freezes over."

It doesn't feel any better to hear similar words from another president 40 years on, nor will they read any better to his speechwriters years from now. But the human pain they foretell will not be mainly theirs.

Daniel Ellsberg worked in the State and Defense departments under Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. He released the Pentagon Papers to the press in 1971.

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